The period from Descartes to Kant was a time of ferment, filled with imaginative and creative approaches to the great questions of philosophy. At the time Descartes wrote, the philosophy taught in the universities was highly theological and quite out of touch with the exciting new developments abroad in the world: the growth of the new sciences, the discovery of the new world, the breakdown of feudal society, and the shocks of the reformation. So philosophy moved out of the universities, not to return until Kant. Never has philosophy been more vibrant, more entwined with the progressive thought of the day, pushing the cutting edge of scientific, mathematical, and political thought. As we look back, we can see a continuous conversation among the leading thinkers, an evolving dialectic concerned with the roles of reason, sense, and faith in our knowledge and our practice.

The principal themes of the era include:

- The role of God in the world, our knowledge, and our morality
- The sources and extent of our knowledge
- The reality of the physical world and our knowledge of it
- The nature of the human soul or self and our knowledge of it
- The grounds of moral obligation
- The origin and justification of civil society among humans

Much of the conversation of 17th and 18th century philosophy can be understood as a dialogue between two generally coherent approaches to these themes: Rationalism and Empiricism. Their dialogue is capped by Immanuel Kant’s magisterial attempt to reconcile them within his vast and complex critical system. In this course we will be concerned with understanding the general structure of this debate, focusing on three major figures: René Descartes, the father of modern philosophy, a great Rationalist; David Hume, the greatest of all philosophers to have written in English and the crowning glory of Empiricism; and Kant, perhaps the greatest philosopher of them all.

Though everything we will read is over two hundred years old, the themes and questions raised in these works are still very much with us. These are all great works of philosophy, and they are difficult to read, but the rewards are inestimable. These are also works that demand active reading, and that means writing, so reading notes will be required as well as frequent papers. This is a difficult course, but it offers a rare chance to think along with the greatest minds of the western world.